

RIDE TO IBR Stops S



In August 2005, Surgeon General of the Navy and Chief of the Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, VADM Don Arthur, was riding a motorcycle to the 2005 Iron Butt Rally (the "big show" of long-distance motorcycle riding), which began in Denver, Colo. Unfortunately, he got only as far as Missouri, when the unthinkable happened. A woman made a U-turn, using a rutted dirt path across the median, and entered the left lane just ahead of him.

The subsequent crash sent VADM Arthur first to the Heartlands Medical Center in St. Joseph, Mo., then to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.

As you may remember from the article "No Grass Growing Under These Wheels," which appeared in the fall 2005 issue, VADM Arthur is a strong advocate of motorcycle safety. He credits a healthy regard of PPE for saving his life in this incident, just like it did in a major crash in 1973.

Here's the story of what happened in Missouri, in the Admiral's own words.—Ed.

Short in “Show Me” State

The Accident

I allowed myself plenty of time to get to Denver for the IBR start—enough that I could enjoy some non-interstate roads. I chose to ride west on U.S. 36, a nice four-lane, divided highway through the heartland of America’s corn and soy crops. At about 2 o’clock on a clear and sunny Wednesday afternoon, a woman driving east in a 1990 Dodge Dynasty made a U-turn, using a rutted dirt path across the median. She entered the left lane in my direction only 200 feet from the crest of a hill, just as I and the pickup truck I was passing crested the hill. The pickup driver told the highway patrol that my speed was 65 mph. At that speed, the 200 feet between the stationary vehicle and me took just two seconds.

My only memory of the accident is a brief feeling of incredulity that I was about to hit a car—where had it come from? I recall the bike striking the car’s trunk

and a sensation of pitching forward. My next memory is awakening strapped to a litter just before being put in the ambulance. I must have made a noise because the paramedic leaned over to me and said, “Are you with us?” I told him I was and, after glancing sideways at my mangled bike, said, “Do you think that’ll buff out?” Since the accident was 20 miles from where the ambulance was dispatched, I estimate I was unconscious for about 30 minutes, which is just as well, because my injuries were plenty painful.

The trooper called me a few days after the accident to tell me the details. He seemed very apologetic that he “could not” write a citation. Apparently, crossing a highway median is perfectly legal in Missouri, no matter whether it’s safe or not. He told me the “locals” don’t use that path to turn around because there have been so many accidents there. But, he added, the driver of the Dynasty “wasn’t from around here—she’s from the next town, 10 miles away.” If she’d only driven two-tenths of a mile farther, there is a designated turnaround area.

Hospitalization

I carry all my emergency personal and medical information in the left chest pocket of my Aerostich and have written “Emergency Info This Pocket” on the flap. The paramedics and hospital emergency staff said this helped them a lot, especially before I regained consciousness.

The Heartlands Medical Center in St. Joseph, Mo., performed flawlessly. As many of you know, I am an emergency-medicine specialist and have worked in many trauma hospitals. The care at HMC was fabulous from the instant I was wheeled in the emergency entrance to when I was medevaced [*to the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Md., a facility VADM Arthur commanded until a year ago*]. The staff was very professional, compassionate, thorough, and coordinated. The intensive-care unit staffs also were superb. It’s nice to know that we have such an excellent health system and that it’s there when you need it.

When the staff learned I am in the military, many former and reserve military folks dropped in to wish



me well. The nursing staff had to cut off the phone calls and visitors after a while because I was becoming exhausted.

The staff also offered to help my wife (Bean) with housing, transportation, or anything else she needed when she arrived on Thursday.

The Injuries

I am incredibly grateful to be alive. Hitting a stationary object at 65 mph could have been fatal. I feel the BMW Telelever front end *[a design that provides a natural anti-dive capability, which allows all the force of maximum braking to be routed to the chassis, instead of to the rider]* figured prominently in my being here today. I also was wearing a full Aerostich Roadcrafter suit *[like many of his long-distance-riding friends wear]*, an advanced-concept carbon-fiber helmet, good boots, and gloves.

Thanks to the 'stich, I have no road rash—I'm just sorry they had to cut it off. Thanks to the helmet, I suffered no brain injury. My injuries are a pelvis fractured in four places, a separated right shoulder, and fracture/separations of two ribs at the sternum, which

caused a pneumothorax (partly collapsed lung).

I feel incredibly blessed these are injuries that will heal without serious long-term consequences, no surgery is required, and there was no serious internal injury.

The Bike

It was a 2000 K1200LT. I can safely say it's a total loss—too bad, it was running so well, and everything worked. It was the perfect bike. It's a shame to lose it with only 306,000 miles on the odometer.

Coni Fitch is my hero! She and I were supposed to begin the IBR together. When she heard of my accident, she flew to St. Joseph and immediately took charge of getting all my gear—including some of the “hard wired” add-ons, like fuel cell, GPS, etc.—off the bike. She and Bean also went to the accident scene and took photographs of the area from all angles. When I saw the photo she took from where the woman crossed the median, looking east, I gasped. I couldn't believe how little of the roadway she could see before pulling out into my lane...200 feet, where the posted speed limit is 65 mph!

Photo by Mrs. Arthur

This view of the accident scene shows how little of the roadway the lady in the Dynasty could see before pulling into the lane where VADM Arthur was riding.



“Will You Ride Again?”

I don't know why, but this has been a common question asked of me—but usually by non-riders. I have been riding for 38 years for a total of somewhere around a million lifetime miles. I'm an MSF instructor (now “RiderCoach”) and have had one other serious accident (while working as a mechanic for Harley-Davidson in the early 70s), which put me on crutches for four years. If I were to try to eliminate all “danger” from my life, I would be left with a lot of very hollow free time. Thus, I already have tried to control those factors I can control, mitigate those I can't, and accept (or reject) activities I feel are too dangerous. I like to feel I'm a safe rider—by training and experience and

through a general sense of caution and risk avoidance. However, there always will be factors in our lives over which we have no control—this Dodge Dynasty was one of those. There was no way to anticipate, prevent or mitigate this crash... except to stay home.

I don't believe I would appreciate a life shaped by fearful avoidance of risk, rather than recognition of risk so that it may be diminished as much as possible—with the realization that the risk never will be zero. ■

At the time this story went to press, VADM Arthur was back on the job, working part days. When asked what advice he has for riders and potential riders as a result of this incident, he said, “Always wear the right equipment. My helmet saved my life.”

Letter to the Editor

In response to the VADM Arthur article in the fall 2005 issue, we received this letter:

During one of my tours as a CO, I had to bury a motorcycle victim. He had a very young wife and newborn. Additionally, we dealt with various injuries, pain and lost man-hours of other shipmates involved in “murdercycle” events; most were not their fault. The article in *Sea&Shore* about the surgeon general was meant to accomplish what?

For the SG to advocate or justify this as a lifestyle choice and to compare it to the risks of military service reflects the lawyer side of his background. Personally, I think it goes beyond the pale of a person in his position and background.

More courses and parking spaces??? Where does he think the mayhem takes place...on base or ashore? When everyone rides a motorcycle, it may be a better choice; until then, though, it's an inherently dangerous lifestyle, and to play it up otherwise with smooth language is a disservice to our young and extremely impressionable shipmates. How many can afford the Beamer in the picture with all the bells and whistles that I guess makes him safer on the road?

The example set by the SG, as viewed by me, is an item best evaluated and addressed by the CNO, if necessary.

In his e-mail, Capt. Draude also challenged me to show the “other side of the story,” e.g., the risk-versus-reward standpoint. Here's an example of what I think he was talking about, as taken from an early November 2005 incident report:

A 27-year-old Navy O-2 died from injuries he sustained in a controlled motorcycle race. The victim, a licensed motorcyclist who was wearing all the required safety gear, suffered severe head injuries, including a subdural hematoma and possible herniated brain. He also suffered some fractured vertebrae and a broken rib (with pneumothorax).

Doctors kept the victim on life support while they tried to stop the bleeding in his brain. Their efforts, however, were unsuccessful, and the young O-2 died early the next day, with his wife, mother and a Navy chaplain at his bedside.

At the time of this incident, the O-2 was TAD ashore, attending a school. He was assigned to a DDG.

There have been 14 Navy and Marine Corps motorcycle fatalities in FY 06 (through Jan. 30), excluding this O-2, whose death is reflected in the off-duty/recreational statistics. In comparison, Navy and Marine Corps motorcycle fatalities through the same date in FY04 and FY05 stood at seven and 11, respectively. ■

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